DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 613 CG 023 606

AUTHOR Berzonsky, Michael D.
TITLE A Process View of Identity Formation and Maintenance.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Seattle, WA, April 18-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; Higher Education; *Individual Differences
IDENTIFIERS *Identity Formation; *Identity Models; Identity Status

ABSTRACT

Individuals can be divided into three types of processing orientations: information-oriented; avoidant/diffuse orientation; and normative. These orientations are assumed to operate on at least three different levels: what people actually do; social-cognitive strategies; and identity style. Differences in identity style may be due mainly to motivational factors. One approach to investigating processing orientations has involved constructing a self-report measure of identity style. It was developed by separating the commitment and self-exploration components that would be contained in statements about identity status. Two studies examined the role that processing orientations may play in the construction and reconstruction of self-identity. The first investigation utilized a large-scale sample of 148 college student "pure" status types: achievers, moratoriums, diffusions, and foreclosures. As predicted, identity foreclosures had the highest normative scores, diffusions were highest on the avoidant/diffuse dimension, and achievers had the highest information-oriented scores. The second study focused on how some individuals rigidly manage to maintain and conserve their self-structures despite encountering experiences and stressors that should induce the need to reevaluate and perhaps accommodate their self-views. College students (N=171) completed identity style scales, a coping checklist, and measures of achievement anxiety. The results revealed that both avoidant/diffuse and normative subjects reported being significantly more likely to rely on emotion-focused coping than did subjects with an information style. In conclusion, these results support the utility of a process conceptualization of identity. (ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED335613

A Process View of Identity Formation and Maintenance

Michael D. Berzonsky

Department of Psychology

State University of New York at Cortland

Cortland, New York 13045

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Michael D. Berzonsky

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG023606

An address presented at a Symposium on Alternate Approaches to Ego Identity held at the 1991 Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Seattle, Washington, April, 1991.

Symposium organized by Dr. Nancy Bus[illegible]ch-Rossnagel, Department of Psychology, Fordham University.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A Process View of Identity Formation and Maintenance

Identity is something and it does something. As Erik Erikson (1968) and others have emphasized (see Marcia, 1980), identity is a self-relevant configuration or structure which serves as the conceptual frame for answering questions about the meaning, coherence, and purpose of life. The "doing" side of identity includes directing the processes and strategies people use to cope with problems and circumstances encountered in the course of daily life. These adaptive efforts in turn, may produce negative feedback creating a need to make changes and revisions in the identity structure.

This self-regulatory cycle is depicted in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

People live and adapt within social and physical contexts represented at the bottom of Figure 1. As one interacts in daily life, problems, demands, and self-relevant information are experienced. The identity structure, at the top of the diagram, contains the behavioral scripts and cognitive schemas (see e.g., Neisser, 1976; Abelson, 1981) used to cope with and resolve problems and conflicts. These relatively automatic (Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977) or what Ellen Langer (Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978) has termed "mindless" processes are extremely efficient (Hansen, 1985), but they can promote behavioral rigidity and cognitive distortions (Langer, et al., 1978; Nisbett

& Ross, 1980). To function effectively therefore, feedback about the success of these efforts needs to be monitored. When structure-driven assimilation attempts fail, a state of dissonance will be experienced. Efforts to revise relevant aspects of the identity structure may then be in order. As contextual demands and expectations change, optimal identity development would require an ongoing interplay between assimilative processes guided by the existing identity structure, and accommodative processes designed to modify and revise that structure. (Berzonsky, 1990, presents a more elaborate discussion of this process.)

Identity Processing Orientation

Today I am going to talk about a process view which focuses on differences in how individuals approach the tasks of forming, maintaining, and revising their self-identities. Three processing orientations, presented in Table 1, are highlighted, informational, avoidant/diffuse, and normative.

Insert Table 1 about here

Information-oriented individuals deal with personal decisions and problems by deliberately seeking out, elaborating, and testing self-relevant information. They are most likely to employ a balanced mix of assimilative and accommodative processes as depicted in the self-regulatory model (Figure 1). This orientation is hypothesized as being the dominant approach used

by self-exploring individuals who would be classified as being Achieved or in a state of Moratorium according to Jim Marcia's (1966) identity status model. They conform to the person-as-intuitive-scientist metaphor advanced by George Kelly (1955) and others (see Heider, 1955; Piaget, 1950).

The avoidant/diffuse orientation is characterized by procrastination and defensive avoidance: an unwillingness to confront and face up to personal problems and conflicts. If one delays and waits long enough, situational demands and consequences will eventually determine behavioral reactions. However, these situation-specific adjustments are likely to be temporary acts of behavioral or verbal compliance rather than stable, long-term revisions in the identity structure. This externally controlled style is hypothesized as being indicative of Marcia's (1966) Diffusion identity status--few personal convictions and limited self-exploration. Or, in the words of Philip Cushman (1990), it reflects an "empty self" constantly in need of being "filled" by experiences, approval, consumer goods, and so forth.

The normative approach involves conforming to the prescriptions and expectations of significant others (including parents). Consistent with Tony Greenwald's (1980) conception of a "totalitarian ego," the primary goal of normative-oriented individuals is to defend and conserve the existing identity structure. This protectionist, one-sided reliance on assimilation will minimize potential threats to the self, but at

the cost of maximizing stereotypic responding and cognitive distortions (Fisk & Taylor, 1984; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). The normative orientation is considered to typify Marcia's (1966) foreclosed identity status--rigidly held convictions, limited extensive self-exploration.

These orientations are assumed to operate on at least three different levels (Berzonsky, 1990). The most basic level consists of what people actually do when they solve problems and make decisions in the course of daily living. Social-cognitive strategies are systematic collections of the basic behavioral responses and cognitive representations. The level of identity style, which I am going to focus on today, refers to the strategy an individual typically uses or, reportedly, would prefer to use. We assume that by late adolescence virtually all normal individuals are capable of utlizing all three of these strategies. Differences in identity style, therefore, may be due mainly to motivational factors (see Berzonsky, 1990). Also, contextual demands such as personal involvement (Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981) or accountability (Tetlock, Skitka, & Boettger, 1989) may override stylistic preferences.

Processing Orientation: Identity Style

One approach to investigating these processing orientations has involved constructing a self-report measure of identity style. It was developed by separating the commitment and self-exploration components that would be contained in statements about identity status. The current version is a 39-item

inventory which yields a score for each of the three identity styles and a separate index of identity commitment. Sample items are provided in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

The average test-retest reliability for the four scales over a 2-month period was .74 (range = .71 to .78), and internal reliability coefficients (alpha) have ranged from .62 (information) to .78 (avoidant/diffuse). Also, in previous studies we have found convergence between these style measures and a number of social-cognitive variables. For instance, an information-oriented style has been found to correlate significantly with a number of information-seeking and self-reflective variables (Berzonsky & Sullivan, in press), including need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982), openness to ideas (Costa & McCrae, 1978), and introspectiveness (Hansell, Mechanic, & Brondolo, 1986). The avoidant/diffuse style correlated negatively with information-seeking variables (Berzonsky & Sullivan, in press), but positively with procrastination tendencies and other-directedness (Berzonsky, 1990; Berzonsky & Ferrari, 1990). Normative scores have been found to be positively associated with a socially-defined identity, and with the tendency to defend against new information relevant to "core" areas of the self such as values and belief systems (Berzonsky, 1990; Berzonsky & Sullivan, in press). (Psychometric information

has been summarized in several recent articles and chapters, see Berzonsky, 1989a, 1990, 1991.)

Today I am going to present findings from two recent investigations designed to examine the role that these processing orientations may play in the construction and reconstruction of self-identity. The first data set deals with the hypothesized relationships between identity style and identity status, the second focuses on how individuals with different identity styles cope with stressors that may threaten their sense of self.

Identity Formation: Identity Status and Identity Style

The first investigation utilized a large-scale sample of 148 "pure" status types (Berzonsky & Neimeyer, 1990): 55 Achievers, 28 Moratoriums, 37 Diffusions, and 28 Foreclosures. The sample was selected from 560 undergraduate late adolescents who had been administered a measure of identity status (Adams, Shea, & Fitch, 1979). A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with Identity Status and Sex as the factors and standardized identity style scores (Z-scores) as the dependent variables, revealed only a significant main effect (Pillais) of Status, F (12,417) = 8.61, p <.001. No significant effects of Sex (F < 1) nor any Sex by Status interactions (F < 1) were found. The mean standardized (Z-Scores) style scores, by identity status, appear in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

As predicted, identity Foreclosures had the highest normative scores, Diffusions were highest on the avoidant/diffuse dimension, and Achievers had the highest information-oriented scores. However, the pattern of findings for the two self-exploring identity statuses was not straightforward. First, the information style scores of Moratoriums were significantly lower than those of Achievers, and, more important, not significantly higher than those of Foreclosures. Second, the normative scores of Achievers were significantly higher than those of both Moratoriums and Diffusions.

Since the Commitment scale in the Identity Style Inventory was correlated with each of the three style variables, a multiple analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with Commitment as a covariate was performed. The adjusted style means appear in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

The covariance analysis helps to clarify the findings. With the effect of Commitment statistically removed, self-exploring Moratoriums have the highest information scores, significantly higher than both Foreclosures and Diffusions. Also, with Commitment controlled, Achievers do not differ from Diffusions or Moratoriums on the normative dimension. Foreclosures continue to

have the highest normative scores, and Diffusions the highest avoidant/diffuse scores even when Commitment is removed.

These findings suggest that the "doing" and the "being" sides of identity are interdependent. For instance, Moratoriums negotiating identity issues will seek out, carefully process, and evaluate self-diagnostic information. These actions will produce feedback about which strategies and self-beliefs work effectively, and which need to be discarded or revised. Over time, an increasingly fine tuned and consolidated identity structure will emerge enabling them to orient successfully toward the environment in a relatively automatic fashion. As a result, less deliberate effort may then be devoted to the elaboration and testing of self-relevant information. Well organized self-constructs and firm identity commitments automatically may drive the processing of self-relevant information in a very efficient but biased manner (see, for example, Berzonsky, 1989b; Hansen, 1985; Markus, 1977).

Identity Maintenance: Coping with Personal Stressors

The second study focused on how some individuals rigidly manage to maintain and conserve their self-structures despite encountering experiences and stressors that should induce the need to reevaluate and perhaps accommodate their self-views.

As Jim Marcia (1976) noted:

> [Foreclosures] have been exposed to four years of 'education' and to the ideas of peers and teachers.... Yet, [they emerge in their] final year either apparently untouched by any of these influences or even more committed to...[their] initial occupational and ideological position. [This] way of looking at the world and processing stimuli must be different somehow from that of the Moratorium who [is] pulled one way and another by attractive ideas, by influential friends, and by persuasive teachers (p. 38).

According to the present model, the way in which individuals construe and cope with stressors and potential threats to the self should vary with their identity style. To investigate this hypothesis, we had 171 late-adolescents complete the Identity Style Scales, a Ways-of-Coping check list (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985), and two measures of achievement anxiety (Alpert & Haber, 1960). Since all the subjects were college students, we focused on a self-as-student theme and instructed them to respond to the coping scales in terms of academic problems which presumably would be self-relevant.

Initially the five coping and two anxiety variables were factor analyzed. Three factors were extracted and rotated obliquely. The Factors were labelled (1) Emotion-Focused Coping, marked by avoidance tactics such as denial, wishful thinking, and concerns about tension reduction; (2) Problem-Focused Coping,

defined by active, strategic problem-solving efforts; and (3) Facilitative Anxiety Reactions. Factor scores were computed for the subjects who were classified according to their identity style: 55 (32.5%) were information-oriented, 57 (33.7%) normative-oriented, and 57 (33.7%) avoidant/diffuse oriented. (Information about identity style classifications is provided by Berzonsky & Sullivan, in press.)

A 3 (Identity Style) by 2 (Sex) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) indicated only a significant main effect (Pillais) of Identity Style, F (6, 314) = 6.14, $p < .001$. No significant main effects of Sex ($F < 1$) nor Style X Sex interactions ($F < 1$) were found. The mean factor scores by identity style are shown in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 about here

The results revealed that both avoidant/diffuse and normative subjects reported being significantly more likely to rely on emotion-focused coping than did subjects with an information style. Information-oriented subjects were found to employ significantly more problem-focused coping than either of the other two styles, who did not differ from each other. No significant style differences in anxiety reactions were found.

These results indicate that information-oriented individuals construed these stressors as being manageable and proceeded to actively search for and utilize problem-relevant information.

That systematic, open approach, however, may at times invalidate existing self-beliefs or self-strategies causing dissonance and a need to revise aspects of their identity structure. In contrast, by resorting to tactics such as wishful thinking and problem denial subjects with an avoidant/diffuse style manage to escape from immediate emotional distress, without confronting the problem directly, and without having to make long-term structural changes. The findings also revealed that normative-oriented individuals attempt to defensively protect against and distance themselves from events and situations that may pose a threat to their foreclosed identity structure. The possiblity needs to be considered that the defensiveness and avoidance associated with the diffuse and normative styles occurs for different reasons. Diffuse avoidance may be more generalized, normative-oriented avoidance more problem-specific (see Berzonsky & Sullivan, in press).

Some exciting attitude-change research indicates that the way in which attitude-relevant information is processed depends on the aspect of the self-concept that is involved. Value-relevant involvement promotes confirmation-biased processing, whereas outcome-relevant involvement tends to lead to more objective processing. Situational expectations become salient when impression-relevant involvement is activated (see Johnson & Eagly, 1989 for a meta-analytic review). In general, one might hypothesize that these types of self-involvement are differentially emphasized by individuals with different identity

styles with normative types primarily concerned with protecting existing values, information types focused on outcomes, and avoidant/diffuse types concerned with impression management. Of course, specific contextual demands may activate a particular type of involvement concern regardless of one's identity style.

In conclusion, these findings support the utility of a process conceptualization of identity. Taken by itself, however, such a view provides a simplified and distorted picture. For instance, in Study 1, structural commitment was found to restrict the use of an information-orientation by subjects with a Moratorium identity status (see also Berzonsky, 1991; Neimeyer, Prichard, Berzonsky, & Metzler, in press). While the identity processes that one uses may influence the identity that one "has", that evolving structure, in turn, drives the processes that one uses. Identity is a multifactorial construct composed of numerous interrelated dimensions including structure, process, context, function, and content. Identity style is only one part of the picture.

References

Abelson, R. P. (1981). The psychological status of the script concept. American Psychologist, 36, 715-729.

Adams, G. R., Shea, J., & Fitch, S. A. (1979). Toward the development of an objective assessment of ego-identity status. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 8, 223-237.

Alpert, R., & Haber, R. N. (1960). Anxiety in academic achievement situations. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 61, 207-215.

Berzonsky, M. D. (1989a). Identity style: Conceptualization and measurement. Journal of Adolescent Research, 4, 268-282.

Berzonsky, M. D. (1989b). The self as a theorist: Individual differences in identity formation. International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology, 2, 363-376.

Berzonsky, M. D. (1990). Self-construction over the life-span: A process perspective on identity formation. In G. J. Neimeyer & R. A. Neimeyer (Eds.), Advances in personal construct theory (Vol. 1, pp. 155-186). Greenwich, CT.

Berzonsky, M. D. (1991). A process perspective on identity and stress management. Chapter to appear in G. R. Adams, R. Montemayor, & T. Gulotta (Eds.), Advances in adolescent development (Vol. 4). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Berzonsky, M. D., & Ferrari, J. (1990). [Identity style decision-making, and intelligence]. Unpublished data.

Berzonsky, M. D., & Neimeyer, G. J. (1990). [Identity status and identity style]. Unpublished data.

Berzonsky, M. D., & Sullivan, C. (in press). Social-cognitive aspects of identity style: Need for cognition, experiential openness, and introspection. Journal of Adolescent Research.

Cacioppo, J. T., & Petty, R. E. (1982). The need for cognition. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 42, 116-131.

Costa, P. T., Jr., & McCrae, R. R. (1978). Objective personality assessment. In M. Storandt, I. C. Siegler, & M. F. Elias (Eds.), The clinical psychology of aging (pp. 119-143). NY: Plenum Press.

Cushman, P. (1990). Why the self is empty: Toward a historically situated psychology. American Psychology, 45, 599-611.

Erikson, E. H. (1968). Identity: Youth and crisis. NY: Norton.

Fisk, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1984). Social cognition. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley.

Folkman, S., & Lazarus, R. S. (1985). If it changes it must be a process: Study of emotion and coping during three stages of a college examination. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 48, 150-170.

Greenwald, A. G. (1980). The totalitarian ego: Fabrication and revision of personal history. American Psychologist, 35, 603-618.

Hansell, S., Mechanic, D., & Brondolo, E. (1986). Introspectiveness and adolescent development. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 15, 115-132.

Hansen, R. D. (1985). Cognitive economy and commonsense attribution processing. In J. H. Harvey & G. Weary (Eds.), Attribution in contemporary psychology (pp. 65-85). New York: Academic.

Heider, F. (1958). The psychology of interpersonal relations. New York: Wiley.

Johnson, B. T., & Eagly, A. H. (1989). Effects of involvement on persuasion: A meta-analysis. Psychological Bulletin, 106, 290-314.

Kelly, G. A. (1955). The psychology of personal constructs. NY: Norton.

Langer, E. J., Blank, A., & Chanowitz, B. (1978). The mindlessness of ostensibly thoughtful action: The role of 'placebic' information in interpersonal interaction. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 36, 635-642.

Marcia, J. E. (1966). Development and validation of ego identity status. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 3, 551-558.

Marcia, J. E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed.), Handbook of adolescent psychology (pp. 159-187). NY: Wiley.

Marcia, J. E. (1976). Studies in ego identity. Unpublished manuscript. Simon Fraser University.

Markus, H. (1977). Self-schemata and processing information about the self. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 35, 63-78.

Neimeyer, G. J., Prichard, S., Berzonsky, M. D., & Metzler, A. (in press). Vocational hypothesis testing: The role of occupational relevance and identity orientation. Journal of Vocational Behavior.

Neisser, U. (1976). Cognition and reality. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.

Nisbett, R. E., & Ross, L. (1980). Human inference: Strategies and shortcomings of social judgment. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Petty, R. E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Goldman, R. (1981). Personal involvement as a determinant of argument-based persuasion. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 41, 847-855.

Piaget, J. (1950). Psychology of intelligence. London: Kegan Paul.

Shiffrin, R. M., & Schneider, W. (1977). Controlled and automatic human information processing: II. Perceptual learning, automatic attending, and general theory. Psychological Review, 84, 127-190.

Tetlock, P. E., Skitka, L., & Boettger, R. (1989). Social and cognitive strategies for coping with accountability: Conformity, complexity, and bolstering. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 57, 632-640.

TABLE 1

IDENTITY PROCESSING ORIENTATIONS

Processing Orientation	Identity Status	Problem-Solving Approach
Information	Self-Exploring Moratoriums Achievers	Assimilative/ Accommodative Balance: Flexible Adaptation, Structural Revisions
Avoidant/Diffuse	Diffusions	Accommodative Bias: Short-Term Behavioral Changes and Verbal Compliance
Normative	Foreclosures	Assimilative Bias: Behavioral Rigidity and Cognitive Distortions

TABLE 2

SAMPLE ITEMS FROM THE IDENTITY STYLE INVENTORY

INFORMATION STYLE

I have spent a great deal of time thinking seriously about what I should do with my life.

AVOIDANT/DIFFUSE STYLE

It doesn't pay to worry about values in advance; I decide things as they happen.

NORMATIVE STYLE

I prefer to deal with situations where I can rely on social norms and standards.

IDENTITY COMMITMENT

I am not sure which values I hold (Reversed).

TABLE 3

MEAN STANDARDIZED STYLE SCORES

BY IDENTITY STATUS

Identity Status	Style Orientations: Normative	Avoidant/ Diffuse	Information
Moratoriums	-.48AC	.05A	-.05A
Achievers	.19AB	-.36B	.48AB
Diffusions	-.43BD	.51ABC	-.61AB
Foreclosures	.71AB	.01C	-.08B
F-Ratio	12.26**	6.25**	10.78**

NOTE: Within columns means with a common single letter differ by at least $p < .05$. **$p < .001$

TABLE 4

STYLE SCORES ADJUSTED FOR EFFECT OF COMMITMENT

Identity Status	Style Orientations: Information	Normative	Avoidant/ Diffuse
Moratoriums	.29AB	-.17A	-.21A
Achievers	.08C	-.18B	-.05B
Diffusions	-.42AC	-.25C	.35AB
Foreclosures	-.22B	.59ABC	.11C
F-Ratio	4.73**	6.60**	2.37*

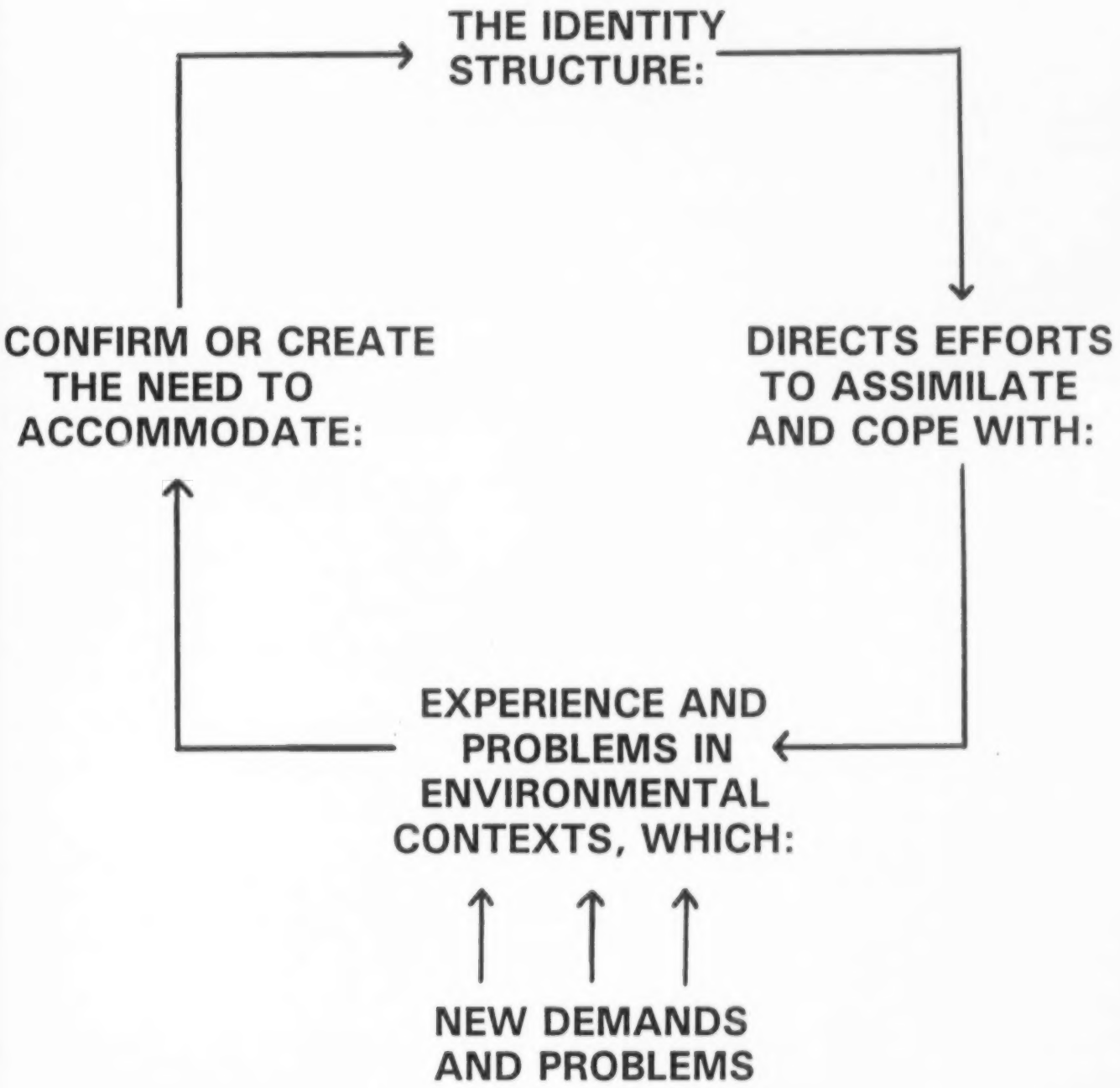
NOTE: Within columns means with a common single letter differ by at least $p < .05$. *$p < .10$ **$p < .01$

TABLE 5

MEAN COPING FACTOR SCORE BY IDENTITY STYLE ORIENTATION

	Coping Factor		
Identity-Style Orientation	Emotion-Focused	Problem-Focused	Facilitative Anxiety
Information	-.37AB	.38AB	.13
Normative	.10A	-.13A	-.15
Avoidant/ Diffuse	.30B	-.23B	.06
F-Ratio	6.23**	6.86**	1.87ns

NOTE: Within columns means within a common single letter differ by at least $p < .05$. **$p < .01$


THE IDENTITY STRUCTURE:
DIRECTS EFFORTS TO ASSIMILATE AND COPE WITH:
EXPERIENCE AND PROBLEMS IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXTS, WHICH:
NEW DEMANDS AND PROBLEMS
CONFIRM OR CREATE THE NEED TO ACCOMMODATE:

A MODEL OF IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

FIGURE 1